

Those Hilarious Russians

Humor intertwined with politics: a survey.

BY PADMA DESAI

Russian political humor was the subject of several lectures I gave during a tour of Australia in 2012 as a guest of the Australian Economic Association. Here I go further and put Russian political humor in a comparative perspective, which illuminates the special nature that sets it apart.

Russian humor is closely intertwined with Russian politics, with what Russians call *anekdot* directed at the Russian way of life under communism or at specific political figures such as Khrushchev and Brezhnev.

JOKES ABOUT COMMUNISM

Both funny and sad, these jokes that reflect the cynicism of the Russian population which had to live under the communist system that flourished oppressively under Lenin and then Stalin, down to recent times despite the revisionism of Khrushchev and Gorbachev.

Question put to Radio Armenia: "Is it possible to build communism in a capitalist country like, say, Netherlands?"

Answer: "Yes, but what have the Netherlands ever done to you?"

An Israeli father is asked what his three sons are doing. "The eldest is in Moscow." "What is he doing?" "Building socialism." The second son is in Bulgaria. "Doing what?" "He is building socialism." Where is the third son? "He is here in Israel." "Is he building socialism?" "What do you mean? Israel is our own country." (Cynical observers note that, for many socialists, socialism is for export, not for oneself. These socialists are therefore often described contemptuously and in jest as "long-distance revolutionaries.")

A Visit to Hell: A Russian communist is being shown around hell for a preview by the devil. In one cell, Lenin is being whipped. In the next cell, Stalin is being flayed alive. In the third cell, Gina Lollobrigida is sitting on the lap of Walter Ulbricht of East Germany.

The Russian says: "I want the last cell when I am sent to hell."

"Ah," the devil says: "you do not understand. That is not Ulbricht's cell. It is Gina Lollobrigida's cell."

A buyer puts down money for a car to be delivered ten years later. He asks: "Morning or evening?" The bureaucrat handling the transaction says: "Ten years later, what difference does it make?" The man answers: "The plumber is coming in the morning."

JOKES ABOUT SOVIET LEADERS

Joseph Stalin gave a speech where he said: "I am prepared to give my blood for the cause of the working class, drop by drop." A note is passed to him from the audience: "Why drag things out? Give it all now."

When Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman in outer space in 1963, she returned pregnant. **Nikita Khrushchev** faced a dilemma: either to assume that the Americans had gotten there first, or to believe in immaculate conception.

When the Americans had landed a man on the moon, **Leonid Brezhnev** was determined to do better. He collected his astronauts and told them: "I am going to send you to the sun." When the astronauts exclaimed that they would burn up, Brezhnev protested: "Do you think I am a fool? I will send you at night."

When prices and supplies of goods were freed and people could queue for goods, there was a long line for sugar. So, an impatient Russian consumer said: "I am going to go and queue instead at the Kremlin to register my protest to President **Mikhail Gorbachev**." Soon, however, he was back; and so he was asked, what happened? "Well, the line there was longer."

In another version, "I am fed up with waiting in this queue. So, I am going to queue at the Kremlin to shoot Gorbachev." When he returns, he is asked: Did you?" Answer: "Well, no. When I reached the end of the queue, I found that they had run out of bullets."

Boris Yeltsin sold off state assets to wealthy oligarchs who then built palatial dachas and indulged in conspicuous consumption. One oligarch had three swimming pools. Why? Because one was for guests who liked to swim in hot water; the second was for guests who liked to swim in cold water. The third was for the guests who could not swim.

Vladimir Putin is eating at a restaurant along with Dmitry Medvedev. After he has had his steak, the waiter asks Putin, "What about the vegetable?" Putin replies: The vegetable will also have steak. ◆

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